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ABSTRACT

The high attrition rate among North American expatriate executives has become a significant problem for firms doing business in foreign countries. A review of the literature reveals a number of factors contributing to attrition, including culture shock, family problems, managerial style and practice differences, insensitivity to host cultures, and an ignorance of the geography, history, and language of the host country. These problems are often compounded by the expatriate executive's need to carry out organizational goals and policies in the same way he or she had done in the home office. To reduce high attrition rates among expatriate executives, firms should improve their selection and screening processes, provide candidates for foreign jobs and their families with comprehensive training, and provide them with techniques for coping with the stress of living and working in a foreign culture. (FL)

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EXPATRIATE EXECUTIVE FAILURE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE UNDERLYING CAUSES

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ABSTRACT

The high attrition of North American expatriate executives has become a significant problem for firms doing business in foreign countries. This paper explicates some common problems which confront expatriate executives and their families, both during and after their foreign assignment. The inability to communicate and function effectively across intercultural barriers may well result in the non-culmination of business agreements. Causes of these problems include insensitivity to host cultures, failure to adapt to different behavioral and social systems, and the lack of appropriate management style in dealing with culturally different employees. These problems are only compounded by the expatriate executive's being expected to execute organizational goals and policies as they are by his or her firm in the country of origin.

Attempts to reduce high attrition rates have produced character and personality profiles useful for the selection of candidates. Careful selection of candidates trained to make adjustments to foreign cultures significantly reduces attrition and, therefore, improves the likelihood of successful international business ventures.

EXPATRIATE EXECUTIVE FAILURE: AN OVERVIEW OF THE UNDERLYING CAUSES

The integration of expatriate business professionals to host cultures presents a variety of challenges, problems, and opportunities for corporations, families, and to executives themselves. North American expatriate executive families working overseas are younger than ever before and also are given broader management responsibilities than in previous years (Orr and White, 1980; Zeira and Harari, 1979). Another trend that has been observed is the afore mentioned attrition rate among these expatriates of from 40% to 85% before they complete their full tours of duty in the host countries. (Harris, 1979; Ackermann, 1976; Adams and Kobayashi, 1969). Harris (1979) asserts that the cost of expatriate family relocation ranges between $50,000 and $130,000 per family; inflation has undoubtedly increased those figures. Because of the high failure rate and cost factors of relocation, American firms are quite naturally concerned about the effects of expatriate failure on their budgets and profitability of overseas operations. Does the relative youthfulness and increased responsibility of today's expatriate executive contribute to high failure rates experienced by many North American companies? It can be argued that age and responsibility are merely coincidental factors to a much more insidious problem faced by the expatriate executive: stress due to intercultural miscommunication and misunderstanding.

There is no doubt that the expatriate executive bears a great responsibility in these complex times. Beyond the initial culture shock

and feelings of isolation, the expatriate must also contend with intensified competition from other foreign multinationals (Reardon, 1982). In addition, the overseas executive must also consider the public image of his corporation with the host government.

Partly because of increase political volatility of certain host governments, and a tendency towards nationalism (i.e. nationalization of foreign interest in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia), there is a growing effort by the personnel managers of North American firms to provide potential expatriate employees with cultural sensitivity training. In many such cases, however, training is quite inadequate with the bulk of the material covered centering around individual expatriate tax structure and a media presentation entitled something like, "Welcome to Ecuador." Ackermann (1976 p. 299) argues that companies involved in cross cultural contexts, may in some cases, be sending individuals to negotiate contracts who have no "interest in, background of, or aptitude for dealing comfortably and effectively with, foreign nationals." A recent abstract in the International Executive (1980) suggested that with appropriate screening of potential expatriate executives, the attrition rate could be lowered to 24%.

Besides the obvious loss of business revenue which has been diverted from the "net profit" column to the "relocation overhead" column, the attrition of expatriate executives has the effect of creating a North American "merry-go-round" which indigenous business counterparts, who value sociability and personal relationships much more than competence, don't know with whom to deal from week to week (Hall, 1956; Rankis and Biggers, 1983; Biggers and Rankis, 1982). If business counterparts perceive themselves to be dealing with strangers, the

likelihood of miscommunication and misunderstanding increases. Additionally, Ackermann (1976, p. 299) suggests that the "common results of transcultural misreadings are mistrust, anger, and pulling out of 'sure' deals, that is, ultimate personal and corporate loss." This situation adds to the pressures on an already ill-equipped executive trying to maintain control over a multinational business environment. In two separate studies, Rankis and Biggers (1981, 1983), found that communicative differences, that are not mutually recognized effect upon the business negotiations process. Moreover, there appears to be a stable negative perception of the North American who is perceived by both Latin American and Caribbean business professionals as being "controlling," "dominant", and having feelings of representing a "superior company".

This paper will further explicates some of the specific problems facing the North American expatriate executive. These problems consist of a broad range of interactions with host governments, co-workers and peers, corporate headquarters, families, and clients.

Culture Shock

It is not uncommon for expatriates to suffer from the changes involved in an overseas relocation especially where there has been an immersion in a strange culture. This phenomenon, known as culture shock, is defined by Adler (1975), as "primarily a set of emotional reactions to the loss of perceptual reinforcements from one's own culture, to new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and to the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences." Extreme cases of culture shock may force a new expatriate to return home. Homes and

Piker (1980) estimate that up to 80% of expatriate failures are the result of poor personal adjustment, not lack of skill. Homesickness is quite common, but severe cases might manifest themselves in mental illness, alcoholism, depression, nervousness, or drug abuse (Dodd, 1982). Adler identifies five stages of culture shock: contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence. He maintains that the transition through these stages represents a move to greater cultural awareness, and that from this awareness evolves a deeper level of experiential learning which Adler believes is beneficial to one's personal growth and development. Unfortunately, the bewildered executive may surrender to the initial stages and never move on to reintegration and its subset benefits.

The Family

The emotional health and happiness of the expatriots' family is absolutely crucial to the success of the overseas mission. When a family fails to adjust to the demands thrust upon it by both the physical move and psychological implications the executive may be forced to return home, or at the very least, spend valuable working time contending with personal problems of the family. It is important for employers not to overlook the effects of culture shock on the expatriate employee's family. What of the expatriate employee who elects (by choice or circumstance) to leave the family in North America? Harris (1979) attributes increased divorce rates of expatriates to situations in which they are sent abroad for shorter periods of time without the family. Harris explains that the expatriate's role becomes one of a

"money machine" to his/her family, and upon returning home, finds a deteriorated role in the family.

Families can provide valuable support to the expatriate executive, both in his personal adjustment and his new business ventures. Family support provides interpersonal contact to the executive which is found in no other source. In addition, family involvement may be approved, even expected, in the executives business dealings. At the same time much is expected of the expatriate family, as they may be coping with unsettling role changes. In the United States, work and personal affairs are generally kept separate with one having little to do with the other. In certain host cultures, however, (e.g. Latin America), the family is more a part of overall business concerns. One may find in Venezuela, for example, that most families have elaborate networks of first cousins who lend favors to one another in the business arena (Hill, 1982). Such relationships between family and business may well have arisen out of the historical political and economic instabilities found in many parts of the world, including parts of Latin America. The compartmentalization of North American family and business concerns are not easily understood by members of a host culture where such interaction is both expected and desirable.

One aspect of expatriate family problems that is frequently overlooked in expatriates orientation programs deals with the wife. Wives, in particular, may have difficulty in adapting to those cultures which restrict the personal freedoms of a female. These problems most often occur in the Middle East, and part of Africa. Mira (1979) cites the typical lack of cultural training provided to executive's wives during an intercultual transition. The wife may find herself

re-learning how to shop and how to be socially accepted in the host society through trial and error. Such a method for learning "correct" behavior is best left to the "strong of heart and adventurous," not to the inexperienced expatriate wife, struggling to adjust to a seemingly ever-changing environment. Little wonder, then, that many express such complaints as boredom, helplessness, feelings of confinement, and frustration. Some informal assistance may be available to the expatriate wife through informal channels. One expatriate wife who lived in Saudi Arabia explained that women such as herself would develop friendships with other American expatriate wives in the corporate residential community. Such support groups enabled the women to function more effectively through sharing past experiences, and newcomers could learn how and where to shop, as well as relieve some of the feelings of boredom and confinement. While a most useful device for many, the obvious problem is that the wife is limited to friendship selection from a small population; another is that she may withdraw even further from interaction with natives of her host culture when intra-group problems arise.

Differences in Managerial Style and Practice

Several senior executives of large multinational corporations based in Miami, during personal interviews, stressed the importance of proper employee relations. A company's public and political image in Latin America, for example, is strongly determined by how it treats its national employees. Should a company's image suffer because of an insensitive action by a manager, it would not be unusual for the company to experience problems with the host government. Before attempting to

manage a project in a host culture, it is always wise to understand the value systems and priorities of the culture.

In addition to overcoming culture shock and family problems, expatriate executives must learn to adapt to cultural differences in employer-employee relationships. Executives used to dealing with their corporate headquarters in North America must often radically alter their managerial styles as they direct operations in their new host country. Line and staff organizational development, while widely practiced in the U.S, may be difficult for Mexicans, for example, to comprehend. This could be related to the Mexican form of government; Hill (1982) cites the political selection of the Mexican president and the power given him by the people as being indicative of there attributing great status and power to the executive office. Mexico, where the President holds a six year term of almost absolute power, is not unlike other Latin American systems where highly centralized decision making structures are found. In other words, Latin American authoritarian management styles may be attributable to Latin America social systems. Bourgeois and Boltinik (1981) argue that such well defined social systems as found in Latin America create large obstacles to organizational development overseas. Subordinates are not asked for input, as such a request would be viewed by the subordinate as a sign of weakness on the part of management. Bourgeois and Boltinik additionally found that employee loyalty was to "people," as opposed to organizations. This certainly has implication for managerial style and practice, particularly where such expectations differ.

Even such seemingly simple questions as what to call one's colleagues may snag the unwary business expatriot. American business

professionals tend to function with both co-workers and superiors on a first name basis. In Nicaragua, however, formal titles are used daily, as they are in the Middle East, and other parts of the world. A title such as "doctor" becomes a physical part of the name to a far greater extent than in North America. Titles are a sign of respect and do not necessarily indicate only academic degrees, but profession or occupation as well. In most of Latin America if one is an engineer, he is referred to as "Ingeniero" Smith; if a teacher, "Licenciado" Smith, etc. American expatriates habitual informality when addressing one another would be a great sign of disrespect in much of Latin America, and could certainly lead to "getting started on the wrong foot," at the very least.

Rankis and Biggers (1983), and Biggers and Rankis (1982), who studied interpersonal perception during international business negotiations, found that a number of behavioral differences exist between North American, Latin American, and Caribbean business professionals. Their hierarchical ranks of personality dimensions of each counterpart were substantially different and are reported in figure 1. below:

	Best=1	Least=4		
North American	1. Competent	2. Honest	3. Composed	4. Sociable
Latin American	1. Honest	2. Competent	3. Sociable	4. Composed
Caribbean	1. Honest	2. Competent	3. Sociable	4. Composed

figure 1

The above results suggest that the intercultural counterpart holds varying perceptions and expectations of those with whom he will do business. When expectancies are not met, conflict, disappointment, and frustration are likely to arise.

Additionally, the two studies demonstrate significant differences in how meetings were conducted, locus of meeting control, competitive posture, and nonverbal behaviors during the meetings. Overall results suggested that the North American is quick to want to do business on time, move the meeting along, even in the intercultural counterpart's office, since the North American feels that he is dealing from a position of strength.

Problems of Insensitivity to Host Cultures and Expected Behavior

Academicians and practitioners involved in intercultural/international relations all possess favorite anecdotes about inappropriate behavior in a host culture. Typical stories include those about the American executive who drove his motorcycle through a mosque in Iran, or the executive's wife who went shopping in downtown Cairo wearing a bikini bathing suit. Unfortunately, far too few expatriate managers and their families receive adequate screening and/or training in the intercultural communicative aspects of their behavior. As they enter a host culture, they lack the knowledge which could prevent potential embarrassment to themselves and their parent companies.

Americans are often seen as arrogant by foreign observers. Zeira and Harari (1979) suggest that certain forces concomitant to being an expatriate may actually encourage a sense of arrogance. These forces include:

1. changes in the Americans' style of living as they become the corporation's "ambassadors" abroad;
2. fringe benefits which increase their salary and standard of living;
3. changes in social circles which tend to give expatriates greater social prestige.

Such major changes--and largely advantageous--in a family's lifestyle can induce feelings of well-being and self importance. But such economically induced arrogance may well backfire. As the old adage warns, "Do not let thy confidence exceed they ability, for broad is the road to destruction."

American business expatriates and their families may also be ignorant of, and insensitive to, subtleties of nonverbal behavior. An innocent hand gesture in one culture may have quite vulgar meanings in another. Such is the case with the traditional circled thumb and forefinger sign of "A-O.K." In the U.S. this sign is used by people of all ages to signal "good job", "O.K.", or "perfect." But in many other cultures this seemingly innocent hand gesture has the same meaning as that of our extended upright middle finger. In the U.S., we use a hand gesture that means "come in", or "come here." The same gesture in the middle east is how one calls his dog! Expatriates should also be informed about expectations of spatial distances for communicating. Insisting on speaking to an Arab while standing at arm's length may communicate distrust.

Punctuality is yet another great problem for the North American. Many cultures have a different cultural clock by which business is conducted. Rankis and Biggers (1983) found that the North American is

quicker to want to do business on time and move the meeting along (even in the intercultural counterpart's office). Latins' apparent lack of punctuality significantly bothered the North Americans, and for 25% of the North American sample, it actually detracted from the meeting. The North American may be unwittingly importing his/her "important" notions of time, schedule, and structure to the foreign meeting place, where somewhat different attitudes about these notions prevail.

Errors in Gift Giving

Many foreign executives do understand the importance of gift giving. In a recent study by Reardon (1982), 79% of experienced travellers recognized gift giving as an important aspect of persuasion. Because gift giving is culturally determined, expatriates should avoid inappropriate gift giving behavior. Gift giving is important especially in latin America. Reardon (1982), however, writes that gifts given to Latin Americans should be presented only after a friendship bond has been established. It is also appropriate to present someone's wife a present, provided it is not too personal. Knowing how to and how not to give gifts is an important lesson for any expatriate.

Geographical, Historical, and Linguistic Ignorance

Rankis and Biggers (1983) and Biggers and Rankis (1982) found that Latin American business professionals were particularly critical of their North American counterpart's lack of knowledge of the history, geography, and language of the host country. To many people in the world, including North Americans, understanding the history and geography of the host country is to understand it's people. Failure to

do so only communicates ethnocentrism and leads to the perception of a indifference to the host culture. As Hall (1956) described, many Americans tend to see the foreign national as an "underdeveloped American." All too often North American ignorance in these areas leads to bewilderment on the part of the host professional who is being courted to participate in long term business relationships. If one is truly interested in establishing such a relationship, one should thoroughly research the country and culture. Not to expend such effort is analogous to the new college graduate's telling an interviewer how much he/she would like to work for a certain organization, without knowing anything about the organization.

Expatriate executives and their family members who display ignorance, or worse, indifference to the history, geography, and language of their host cultural group are doomed to communicate this indifference to the client, and other members of the host group. An example of linguistic ignorance occurred in Latin America about two years ago, when General Motors Corporation attempted to introduce the Chevrolet NOVA to the Latin marketplace. Unfortunately, this is rather like trying to sell the Volkswagen "KAPUT" since "noVa" in Spanish means "it doesn't go"! This type of error is not only embarrassing, but may lead to ill feelings towards the expatriate, and the expatriate's company. It has been said that there is no "international" language, there is only the language of the client.

When the expatriate fails to do his homework, he may well be treated rather cooly by host counterparts and have no idea why. Such treatment by members of the host culture, not understood by the expatriate, may invoke an equally cool response from the expatriate.

Situations like this may ultimately increase the likelihood that the expatriate will not complete the end of his tour.

One of the most common adjustment problems for expatriate families is in the realm of eating habits. North Americans quickly discover that there is no familiar supermarket in their new host country. For some, food shopping and dining out becomes an adventure; for others, a disaster. Negative attitudes and concomitant nonverbal affect displays may easily miscommunicate attitudes about the host culture. In some cases this may even anger members of the host culture, setting up the previously described scenario, with failure as the inevitable result.

There is little doubt that the external cultural factors which affect the expatriate and his family can be most stressful and problematic. The authors believe that these factors heavily contribute to most of the high expatriate attrition rates. Yet, there is at least one more factor critical to the success or failure of an expatriate's mission overseas. This is the factor of selection: deciding which person is best able to represent the parent organization in the host culture.

Given the extremely high rates of expatriate failure, are companies defining "best" in a strictly business sense (i.e., hard-driving, deal-making, etc.), or does "best" mean, most suitable overall? Ackermann (1976) suggests that, in some cases, we may be sending people overseas who have no interest in, capacity for, or aptitude for dealing with members of different cultures. All too often, poor screening or no screening determines which potential expatriate to send.

Thus far we have documented the factors that contribute to expatriate executive failure. We have noted the effects of culture shock, family adjustment, and general cultural differences upon the business executive who lives and works in a country foreign to his own cultural background. We now turn our attention to discussing some of the actions that can be taken to reduce the rate of expatriate executive failure. Our discussion will focus upon the improvement of screening and selection of expatriate executives and comprehensive training for the executive and his family.

Developing more sophisticated selection procedures is one method of improving the chances that the expatriate executive will be successful. Holmes and Piker (1980) present their technique for determining the suitability of workers for overseas duty. The essence of this technique is based on the prevention of sending ill-suited individuals abroad. Adaptability screening involves both delineating the characteristics most appropriate for expatriate employers, and training personnel managers to evaluate prospective candidates accurately.

Personal qualities conducive to successful intercultural communication include: mental flexibility, communication skills, previous social and cross-cultural exposure, breadth of interests, a positive attitude towards change, social adaptability, tolerance or frustration, and physical and emotional stamina and resilience. Characteristics found desirable for expatriates are: empathy, self-awareness, role differentiation and reversal, low dogmatism, tolerance for ambiguity, regard for equality, knowledge of nonverbal communication, and self esteem (Shabatz, 1978). These characteristics,

essential in an overseas executive, are however, equally desirable for the spouse, if family stability is to be maintained during expatriation.

Additionally, Holmes and Piker recommend an open ended interviewing process that encourages a free flowing dialogue. Such a dialogue when accompanied with systematic observations, gives the examiner ample opportunity to evaluate each applicant carefully. It is advisable to avoid candidates who have the following negative characteristics: "(1) the urge to get away from something (either personal or related to work), (2) a wish for change for change's sake, or (3) the pursuit of high financial awards alone."

Holmes and Piker maintain that the turnover rate for expatriates can be reduced from 40% to as low as 5%, if new approaches are implemented .

Zeira and Harari (1979) recommend additional measures which can be implemented to assist managers transferring from corporate headquarters to the host country:

1. Have expatriate managers adapt their behavior to the expectations of the HCOs and host country subordinates by providing them with proper training programs and evaluating their success on the basis of their adaptability to the expectations of the host environments.

2. Sensitize expatriate managers to the differences between the characteristics of their host environments and those of their home countries.

3. Urge expatriate managers to constantly improve their professional knowledge as well as their understanding of and familiarity with the host country, and provide them with the appropriate working conditions for doing so.

4. Appoint host country nationals as deputies of expatriate managers, thus creating top management teams in subsidiaries which combine host country deputy manager's familiarity with the host environments with expatriate manager's extensive influence at HQ.

The preceding recommendations are only a few of the conditions necessary for success in overseas operations. Other concerns, such as appropriate compensation for host nationals in management, are also important, but pertain primarily to the economic aspects of the operation.

Given the additional stress placed upon all members of the family unit which results from being transplanted to another community in another culture, it would seem reasonable to provide appropriate tools to the family to help manage their resulting anxiety and tensions. While some trainers may talk about resulting family stress, few provide adequate approaches for managing it. A systems approach to family interaction stressed the interdependent nature of family structure. Systems theories emphasize the relationship of all parts of the system, and describes how individual components of the system relate to one another and affect the whole. As noted by Kantor and Lehr "family systems, like all social systems, are organizationally complex, open, adaptive, and information-processing systems." Proponents of systems theory believe that it is inappropriate to focus on only one member of a family to provide training, intervention or counseling (Bavelas and Segal, 1982; Barnhill, 1979; Olson, Sprenkle and Russell, 1979).

Given the stress that occurs when families are moved to a new cultural context, and given the systems nature of families, we strongly argue for training and orientation programs for the entire family. In addition to the traditional training approaches and content (e.g., orientation to the host country, culture, geography, language) family members should be given training in improving communication among themselves. Family members will become increasingly important to one

another as a support group in times of drastic change and reorientation. Yet it is often assumed that family members have appropriate knowledge and sensitivity to communicate effectively and to manage the tension and inevitable conflict that occurs due to their becoming expatriots.

Several studies provide evidence that programs aimed at improving family communication skills can enhance a families ability to manage stress. Research by Witkin and Rose (1978) indicates that communication skill training can improve a couples ability to solve problems. Schauble and Hill (1976) designed a training program which helped distressed couples improve interpersonal interaction. Kilmann, Julian and Moreault (1978) found that couples who were given conflict management training ("fair-fighting" skills) reported better adjusted marriages than were couples who were not given such training. Epstein and Jackson (1978) report that couples who were exposed to a total of eleven and one-half hour group training sessions over a three week period experienced an increase in spouse-rated empathy and a decrease in attack toward one another. We should note, however, that additional research is needed to document long term effects of communication training for family members. Otto (1975), Koch and Koch (1976) Hopkins and Hopkins (1976) question whether skill development intervention programs produce long-lasting results. Kilman, Julian and Moreault (1978) and Foster (1978) report short term benefits of communication intervention programs but also call for additional research to determine whether more lasting changes occur. Despite questions as to the long-term benefits of communication training, we believe ample evidence supports the value of communication training for the entire family that is faced with being relocated in a new culture.

The planning of expatriate operations should consider the complete expatriate orientation process. Harris (1979) recommends a four-part program, including: (1) special selection, (2) orientation before departure (3) continual monitoring and the provision of support services, and (4) assistance in the re-entry process.
Comprehensive training of personnel managers and planning of all aspects of overseas management of multinational operations can greatly improve the success rates of international transfers.

We also recommend a comprehensive training program for the expatriate, but go beyond Harris (1979) by including at the very least, the spouse. The entire family should be included if possible. Such a program may be more expensive, but when compared to the cost of relocating a family overseas and then having to bring them back, the cost is very small indeed. With appropriate training, the family can build upon the positive support structure already in existence. Without such a family support structure the expatriate will spend valuable time managing family problems, rather than solving client problems.

In summary, family intercultural training should include the following:

1. Psychological screening so that potential problems might be dealt with prior to leaving home. Such screening would be for the use of the expatriate and his family only, and not for the employing company. The psychological data would not be found in the personnel record, but shared solely with the client, so that the client could make a better decision as to whether or not a radical change in lifestyle should be made for the family.

2. Intensive language programs for the executive and spouse if the stay in the host culture is to be an longer than six months.

3. Training for the executive in negotiation behavior expected in the host country, as well as in other communicative behavioral differences.

4. Family training in culture shock and methods of coping with stress. Interval monitoring should be done by the parent organization to determine adjustment, as well as to create a data base of problems and solutions that might be integrated into future training.

5. Family training in effective family communication skills.

6. Appropriate literature for the family about the country and its people, problems encountered by others, local foods, etc.

7. Training in appropriate etiquette, titles, and social relations. The family should be versed in gift-giving practices, and major holiday celebrations.

8. Training in doing business with members of the host country--i.e., verbal, nonverbal behaviors, expected social and business behaviors.

9. Follow-up and evaluation; program modification as appropriate.

While the above elements are not all inclusive, they should help innoculate against many of the problems that plague North American expatriates. With such training attrition rates can perhaps be even more drastically reduced than others have suggested.

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